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ABSTRACT

Noting that there is little focus in research literature, in popular discussions, or in policymaking regarding how to promote positive youth development, this research brief presents a preliminary set of constructs that might comprise positive youth development in order to spark productive conversations that will lead to a better conceptualization and a greater understanding of the full range of development and behavior possible for children. The list of constructs was based on opinions expressed in national surveys, from a perceived cultural consensus about characteristics and activities that are intrinsically valuable, and from research that finds associations between certain child and youth characteristics and later positive outcomes. Each of the following constructs is reviewed briefly: (1) close parent-child relationships; (2) sibling relationships; (3) peer relationships; (4) character; (5) civility; (6) religiosity/spirituality; (7) tolerance; (8) extracurricular activities; (9) sports and exercise; (10) participation in cultural and literary activities; (11) environmental lifestyle; (12) volunteer community involvement; and (13) social capacity. The brief concludes by noting that there is currently extensive coverage of negative adolescent behaviors and poor child outcomes, and that the scarcity of information on positive development is due, in part, to a lack of consensus among experts in the field regarding positive outcomes desired for children. This lack of consensus undermines the capacity to raise healthy, high-achieving children. (Contains 34 references.) (KB)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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Preventing Problems vs. Promoting the Positive: What Do We Want for Our Children?

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As a nation, what do we want for our children, especially our adolescents? Naturally, we want them to avoid drugs, violence, and crime, and we don't want them to drop out of school or become teen parents. But most parents want something more for their children than simply avoiding serious problems. They want children who are happy and emotionally healthy, who have positive relationships with other people, and who contribute to the community.

While parents hold these desires for their individual children, our collective aspirations for youth appear limited to avoiding problems. There is surprisingly little focus in the research literature, in popular discussions, and in policy making on how to promote ***positive*** *youth development. The trends we track, the data we collect, the programs we fund, and the media images we see focus largely on problem behaviors by adolescents. Not surprisingly, adults in a Public Agenda poll expressed stridently negative views of teenagers, seeing them as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild."*[15]

Yet this limited perspective may well overstate the frequency of negative behaviors and understate the extent to which America's youth are engaged in positive, productive activities. It certainly fails to capture the hopes and dreams of most parents and teens, and probably the vast majority of adults who are not currently raising children.

But how does a society as diverse as the U.S. agree on the positive attributes we want in our children and youth? Are there characteristics that are valued by Americans regardless of religion, culture, income, and education? To encourage discussion, researchers at Child Trends developed a preliminary set of constructs - broad concepts or attributes - that might comprise positive youth development. In developing this list, Child Trends drew from opinions expressed in national surveys and polls; from a perceived cultural consensus about characteristics and activities that are intrinsically valuable; and from research that finds associations between certain child and youth characteristics and later positive outcomes. This research brief reviews each construct briefly.

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Close Parent-Child Relationships

Much has been written about the increasing influence of peers during the adolescent years.[4] However, most adolescents retain strong bonds with their parents[25] and continue to spend time with their parents. In general, having a positive relationship with parents constitutes an important indicator of positive youth development. Youth who disconnect from parental influence are at particular risk for delinquent activities and psychological problems.[28]

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Less obvious are the implications of being close to one parent but not the other, but a substantial literature now suggests that children in single-parent families are disadvantaged in numerous ways relative to children raised by both of their biological parents.[19] Furthermore, studies including assessments of both infant-mother and infant-father attachments have found that children who were securely attached to both parents in infancy are more sociable and more socially competent than children who were securely attached to only one parent.[26] Thus, closeness to both biological parents may be an important measure of positive development.

Sibling Relationships

Interactions with siblings are an important aspect of child development.[8,9] These interactions influence the course of a child's social and moral development, including the development of good citizenship and good character. For example, friendly behavior directed toward a younger sibling by an older sibling was associated with the younger sibling's development of relatively mature behavior in both conflictual and cooperative situations.[10] The young sibling had a similar positive effect on the older sibling's social behavior. Indeed, positive sibling relationships early in life are associated with higher quality social skills with peers.[21] Strong sibling relationships are also a source of fun, satisfaction, and support while children are young and represent a source of social support over the life course.

Peer Relationships

Social interactions with peers build upon and refine the rules and norms of social interaction that children first encounter in their families. Although many adults assume that the influence of peers on adolescents is negative, the implications of peer relationships are often more positive than negative.[2] At any age, relationships between peers provide opportunities to hone social skills and prosocial behavior. In addition, peer relationships can provide cognitive, social, and physical stimulation through joint activities and conversations. Indeed, developing cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with peers is considered essential for successful negotiation of life.[3] Children who have poor peer relationships are at risk for later life difficulties, especially school dropout and criminal behavior.[27]

Friendships in particular can provide emotional security and intimacy and can often serve as an additional source of support outside of the family, especially in times of crisis. Good friendships are one of life's pleasures and can buffer against mental health problems and destructive behaviors.

Character

Character encompasses the notions of responsibility, truthfulness, good values, and steadfast adherence to one's principles. It becomes important during the pre-adolescent and adolescent years, when enduring values develop and begin to be manifested.

Public concern is high over the perceived failure of parents to instill strong values in their children. For example, a survey sponsored by the National Commission on Children[25] found that adults, both parents and non-parents, expressed strong concern that important values were receiving too little emphasis among contemporary families. The constellation of characteristics incorporated into the notion of character, and the absence of character, appear to resonate strongly with the public.

Civility

Civility - treating others with respect - has become a very salient issue in recent years.[15,6] The presence or absence of civility is evident in the tenor of public discourse and in people's everyday interactions. Unfortunately, a recent survey conducted by Public Agenda[15] found that only about 12 percent of adults think it is very common for teens to treat people with respect. Although standards for civility become somewhat more demanding as children become older, the elements of civility appear well before adolescence.

Religiosity/Spirituality

Despite the legal separation of church and state, it might nevertheless be argued that involvement in some type of religious or spiritual activity is an attribute of positive youth development. This is indeed what many youth development workers have found in their work with adolescents.[5,18] In addition, researchers have found that attendance at services and other activities sponsored by religious organizations is correlated with better health and less risk-taking.[2,23] (In a secular society, it may be desirable to pair this construct with tolerance of others who follow a different or no faith tradition, as discussed next.)

Tolerance

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution, and discrimination is proscribed by numerous laws. Yet, the successful integration of diverse groups into national life requires that the public absorb and live out these laws in their daily lives. Tolerance is an attribute that encompasses respectful attitudes and nondiscriminatory behaviors toward those who differ from oneself in terms of religious beliefs, demographic background, sexual orientation, values, and goals. Despite conspicuous exceptions, it would appear that tolerance for religious, racial, ethnic and other differences has increased in recent decades. For example, responses to a 1994 survey of American high school seniors indicate increased acceptance of racial integration.[1]

While tolerance is a laudable goal for young people, as our nation continues to diversify, children and the larger society may be even better served by moving beyond tolerance to accepting and even appreciating persons who differ in their social and demographic characteristics.

Extracurricular Activities

In general, researchers have found that involvement in extracurricular activities is associated with positive development. For example, recent research has shown that involvement in at least one school club decreases the chances of a youth's engagement in risk-taking behaviors,[11] reduces the probability of a non-marital teen birth[23] and increases the chances of high school completion for teens who are at risk for school dropout.[20] Noting these kinds of associations, efforts to provide youth development opportunities for disadvantaged and at-risk youth have been widely mounted in recent years. However, such approaches have a very long history, with organizations like Scouts, having been active for many decades.

Sports and Exercise

The health advantages of exercise are widely known, yet many children and youth do not exercise frequently.[24] Although participation in varsity athletics has been found to be associated with a higher incidence of binge drinking and, for males only, with a higher probability of teen parenthood, in general athletic participation is related to more positive outcomes.[34] Among girls, playing sports has been found to be related to a reduced risk of teen pregnancy.[29] While many if not most children and adolescents will not participate in formal or varsity athletics, all kinds of regular athletic participation can contribute to positive development.

Participation in Cultural and Literary Activities

Information is obtained fairly regularly about the frequency with which children and adolescents read (other than for school), but relatively little information is available about other kinds of cultural participation in which children and adolescents might be engaged.[33] For example, how many children have seen a symphony, a dance performance, or a play during the last year? Any of these experiences can be viewed as not only enriching, but as intrinsically enjoyable.

Environmental Lifestyle

On the 30th anniversary of Earth Day, public awareness of the importance of caring for the planet is quite high. But children's involvement in caring for the earth has received little research attention. Agreement on the definition of an environmental lifestyle may be difficult to attain. However, certain basic behaviors that reflect a concern for the environment can undoubtedly be accepted as indicators of positive development. Environmentally conscious behaviors relevant to a broad spectrum of the population would include recycling; cleaning up litter; car pooling, using public transportation, walking or biking to reduce car usage; and moderating furnace and air conditioning temperature to conserve energy.

Volunteer Community Involvement

Community service helps to foster a sense of compassion and responsibility for others. Children and youth learn the principles of tolerance, cooperation and interdependence through participation in community organizations.[14] Exposure to community service engenders a sense of belonging and "connectedness" to the larger community.[13] This is particularly important during adolescence, which is a critical time for identity development,[32,30] but even younger children can benefit from community service.

A rich history of social science research shows that participation in civic activities such as student government or civil rights movements during one's youth predicts a social orientation in both thought and deed 10 to 25 years later.[7,12,16] For example, membership in 4-H and other organizations during adolescence has been found to predict membership and leadership in community organizations in adulthood.[17] Recent research has found that participation in school- or adult-based activities predicts positively to adolescents' political and religious involvement, and predicts negatively to adolescents' substance use.[11, 31, 32]

Social Capacity

One characteristic of a successful human being is his or her ability to live and work peacefully and productively with others. Social capacity is the ability to interact positively within intimate and family relationships, as well as "the ability to demonstrate positive concern and caring in a larger social arena."[22]

Social capacity overlaps with other constructs of positive development, such as volunteering and having positive relationships with family members and peers, but goes beyond them as well. Where social capacity differs is in combining the cognitive and behavioral components. Thus, a person may have empathy and character, but may or may not actively live out these virtues. Alternatively, a person may be a social activist for reasons that have nothing to do with values or caring. Social capacity takes account of both action and the motivation for action.

Conclusion

Currently, there is extensive coverage, both in the media and in our national trend data, of negative adolescent behaviors and poor child outcomes. The dearth of information on positive outcomes desired for and achieved by children contributes to the negative attitudes that the public seems to hold about children and youth. The scarcity of information on positive development is due, in part, to a lack of consensus among experts in the field regarding positive outcomes desired for children. Lack of consensus on positive outcomes undermines our collective capacity to raise healthy, high-achieving children, because parents, communities, youth leaders, and teachers lack a sense of what goals should be sought.

This brief is intended to spark productive conversations that will lead to a better conceptualization and a greater understanding of the full range of development and behavior possible for children. If our horizons extend only to preventing negative outcomes for

individual children, our programs, policies, and public discussions will have quite a different tone than if our goals include positive development for children.

This research brief summarizes key points from "Preventing Problems vs. Promoting the Positive: What Do We Want for Our Children?," by Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D., and Tamara G. Halle, Ph.D. The full paper is available on Child Trends' web site, www.childtrends.org, or may be purchased from Child Trends' publications department, 202-362-5580.

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